

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL ED MASON,
DIRECTOR OF THE WOUNDED SOLDIER AND FAMILY HOTLINE OF THE U.S. ARMY
HUMAN RESOURCES COMMAND, VIA TELECONFERENCE TIME: 1:00 P.M. EDT DATE:
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): I guess we can go
ahead and get started, and we'll -- if anybody joins us, we can tag them on to the end. It's kind of a
nice little gathering here; got some pretty important folks on the line with us. Colonel Arata, are
you -- are you ready for us?

COL. KEVIN ARATA: I'm ready.

MR. HOLT: Okay. (Pause for direction.)

Colonel Ed Mason, director for the Wounded Warrior and Family Hotline, the U.S. Army
Human Resources Command, with us on the Bloggers' Roundtable. Welcome, sir. Thank you very
much for taking the time to join us. COL. MASON: Good afternoon. How're you all doing?

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

COL. MASON: I'm Colonel Ed Mason, the director of the Wounded Soldier and Family
Hotline. And I've also brought in two of my personnel who work the hotline on a daily basis, Mr.
Jimmy Conn (ph) and Lieutenant Colonel McNorton, just in case I want to go into a little bit more
information.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sounds good.

COL. ARATA: Are you going to go around the horn and introduce folks, Jack, or --

MR. HOLT: Well, we can. Does -- Colonel Mason, do you have an opening statement?

COL. MASON: Yes, actually, I do. I would like to -- to tell you all it gives me great pride to
be working with Army leaders at the Army level to find solutions to better serve our wounded,

injured, and ill soldiers. A little over four months ago, the acting -- or, then- acting secretary of the Army and the Army chief of staff announced the implementation of a toll-free 800 number for the Wounded Soldier and Family Hotline. And that number is 800 984-8523 or, for those overseas, we have a DSN line, which is 312 328-0002.

We established this hotline with two primary purposes in mind. The first is to provide wounded soldiers and their families a more direct way to seek help with medical issues they are not or have not been able to resolve at their level or using their immediate chain of command. And then secondly to provide an information channel of soldier medical-related issues directly to senior Army leaders so they can improve the way the Army serves the medical needs of our soldiers and families.

Army leaders track our progress through daily reports, and then we also do weekly briefings. The Army recognizes some wounded, injured soldiers have had challenges resolving concerns about medical- related issues, and the intent of the Wounded Soldier and Family Hotline is to ensure soldiers and their families have access to every resource the Army has to offer. This hotline is not intended to replace the chain of command, but to serve as another resource for soldiers and their family members. And we've even had veterans call our -- our hotline, seeking support. And so far, the hotline has been seen as a great resource for soldiers and families because it streamlined the process of asking questions or sharing concerns going to a single, go-to phone number, a go-to location, as well as we provide timely feedback to the callers. This is not a fire-and-forget hotline or fire-and-forget mission.

We are only facilitators; we are not case workers, though. We receive issues and determine who needs to know; who can best help that soldier or their family member. We then task that issue out to the organization who can best address the issue, and then that organization then has 24 hours to make their initial contact with the caller to let them know they're working their issue and that they're going to get back with them. That organization then has another two business days to get back with the caller to provide them with a response. The operations center of the hotline then calls the caller back to verify that they did in fact receive a response, and that they understand the response.

Most of the time, callers are very happy someone listed to them and that we were able to provide the information that they needed. Occasionally, however, the Army is not able to completely meet someone's request, so it's important to understand we cannot be all things to all people. The hotline currently has 100 people working, supporting this mission. Fifty of them are soldiers and approximately 50 contractors, to provide 24-hour support seven days a week for those who need us.

All those people that -- that are here to support the hotline want to be here. They believe in the mission and they have a passion for helping soldiers and families. Even the contractors are former soldiers who have been to Iraq or family members with years of experience dealing with the challenges of a life that's part of being with the Army. And to date, we've received over 5,000 calls from soldiers or family members, resulting in just over 1,300 issues worked by the call center representatives, commanders, and the extended support network. We have an Army-wide commitment to help soldiers. All the commanders have been responsive, the VA has been

responsive, and we are constantly looking for ways to improve, and the wounded soldier hotline is an example of that.

I really do appreciate the opportunity to discuss the hotline with you all today. I know how successful bloggers are getting the message out to the American people, so I'm confident you'll be able to help us get the story of the hotline out and its mission out to more soldiers and family members. They have sacrificed a great deal through their service, and they deserve the best care that we can possibly provide them. And this hotline is here to help them with that.

So I'm very interested in hearing your thoughts, your opinions, your questions, and -- and addressing any issues that you have.

MR. HOLT: Outstanding. Thank you, Colonel Mason. And as we get started here, I'd like to ask each one of you on the line, as we go around the table, to identify yourself and your publication so that we can -- we know who we're talking to here. And Andi, since you were first on the line, why don't you kick us off?

Q Hi. I'm Andi Hurley with Andi's World and SpouseBUZZ.com.

MR. HOLT: And Andi, your question? Q Yes, Colonel Mason, thank you for taking the time to talk to us. You mentioned in your opening that your organization makes sure that every resource the Army has to offer is available to our wounded soldiers, but I have a question for you. The -- a lot of private organizations, such as So Much Comfort and Soldiers' Angels, and I could go on and on, offer services.

Do you also get involved in making sure that the soldiers and the family members know that there are private organizations that can help them where the Army can't?

COL. MASON: We use the Military OneSource, and we use also the Army Information Line, and this is -- and this is another opportunity for you to get the message out that others are out there to support.

Q Right.

MR. HOLT: And Grim?

Q Hello, this is Grim of blackfive.net. Andi mentioned Soldiers' Angels. The question I have for you actually comes from one of them, from the Germany contingent. He sent this along for me to ask you. She wants to know if the rear detachments back home have access to the (Trace 2S ?) or (Tracer ?) system, do you have access to it, and if you are able to use it to provide updated information in a timely fashion. Because often she receives contacts from people whose service member had been hurt, and then they hear nothing for 48 hours, sometimes, from anybody with more information about where they are and what's going on.

COL. MASON: Yeah, I'm not familiar with traces, but we do have a network of support where we go out to the Casualty and Memorial Affairs Operations Center to address immediate

issues or concerns. We use the Medical Command; we go directly to MEDCOM for medical-related issues. We go directly to the major commands, the Army service component commands, and the direct reporting units, and that's the basic foundation of our -- of our network.

Q If somebody were to call you, would you be able to get them kind of basic location information? You say within 24 hours, if I understand you correctly. Is that something that's more or less reliable?

LT. COL. MCNORTON: Yes, this is Lieutenant Colonel McNorton. Whenever we get a request for information, and if it has to do with a wounded soldier or a recently wounded soldier, what we do is we take the information of the caller, as much information as we can get, and information about the soldier. Then we go to our operations section and they go through a process. One is to verify that the caller is actually on the emergency notification, that we can actually talk to that person. We have a DD form 93 that verifies that. And then we work hard through the Army Operations Center and the various commands to -- to locate where that service member is and provide the family or the authorized family members that information.

Q Do you make sure that the rear detachment of the unit the soldier's associated with is getting in touch with the next of kin and providing information in a timely fashion?

LT. COL. MCNORTON: Okay, we -- we do not do that. That goes strictly from the Casualty and Memorial Affairs Operations Center. And we work directly with them, that if we get a call that's referencing a -- you know, more of an immediate injury, a family member calls and says hey, I heard that my son or daughter was just wounded in Iraq, we'll take that information and we will go to the Casualty and Memorial Affairs Operations Center, because they have very, very strict controls on releasing information. They've got a specific reporting network that has to happen, and it's got to go through those channels. So we do not provide any information like that at all.

Q Fair enough. Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Did someone else join us?

Q Yeah, Jack. Andrew. I did.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Andrew. (Inaudible.)

Q This is Andrew Lubin from ON Point. I appreciate your taking the time to talk with us.

We were talking to some people two weeks ago, sir, and they mentioned that if you have PTSD, or you're diagnosed with PTSD, you're kind of kicked out of the Army and out of the military medical system. Does that happen in your system, too, if they call -- if somebody's got PTSD, are they disqualified from calling?

COL. MASON: No. I'm not -- I'm not familiar with that. That doesn't sound like it passes the common sense test, to me. Any -- we have had some soldiers call with PTSD, and then we refer them through the medical channel to the subject matter experts that can address that. You

know, the hotline that I have, we are really just facilitators. We collect information, we gather information, we get as many facts as possible, and then we figure out who needs to know, who can best help that individual get the information. And so that -- anything with PTSD we would give to the Medical Command and have the subject matter experts work it.

Q Great. Thank you. MR. HOLT: Okay. Any -- any other questions?

COL. MASON: You know, and it's also, just really quickly on that too, it's -- it's just important for everyone to know that we -- we have not turned a single phone call away. We have not turned a single person away. Twenty-eight percent of the calls that we receive are from veterans; they're not -- they're not currently serving soldiers. So we've taken that, we've established a -- part of our network is the Veterans Administration. Just so that we don't turn anyone away, we will find out how to get support to those individuals, one way or the other.

Q Colonel, Andrew Lubin again. Are you -- are you financed by the Army, or is this -- is this private money?

COL. MASON: No, this is an Army operation.

Q Great. Okay.

COL. MASON: And it is the -- it is a chief of staff of the Army's initiative, and the Army funds it.

Q Colonel Mason, this is Andi again. If I could back up for a moment, I know we're talking largely about what happens after a soldier has -- has already been admitted and is going through some -- some type of problem with, you know, his paperwork, administrative, otherwise. But is there a comprehensive manual or instruction sheet or something that these soldiers and their families receive when they are admitted to Bethesda, Walter Reed, Landstuhl, wherever, that tells them what the resources available to them are?

COL. MASON: You know, Andi, I am not aware of that, but again, we are -- we're a very large organization that's constantly evolving and trying to improve. Some recent improvements have been the Warrior Transition Units, that those are established. And then also the -- the Soldier Family Assistance Centers that the Installation Management Command is putting into place. Those are organizations that will develop tools -- and I think that's a great idea -- to assist soldiers and family members with frequently asked questions. But at this point, I am not aware of anything that's in place like that.

Q Well, I -- to expand on that, I've done a lot of volunteer work at Walter Reed, and I noticed that -- well, first of all, anyone who's admitted, you know, they're going through a great deal, understandably. But just to give you one small example, I was visiting with a soldier's family and his parents only spoke Spanish. And some people had given her some phone cards, but they weren't international phone cards. So I immediately contacted Patty Patton Bader of Soldiers' Angels, and the next day she had international phone cards in her hand. I've had similar experiences with So Much Comfort. Those are private organizations; they're not within the Army -

- you know, it's not an official Army organization. But I do think it would be very helpful for these soldiers and their families if -- and I know it would be a daunting process and, as you say, there may be something you're not aware of it. But if we could work together -- and I know, I think I speak for the MilBlog community; we'd be happy to help in any way we can to help put together some type of manual that lists not only official resources that are important, but also private organizations who stand at the ready to help these soldiers and their families.

COL. MASON: Andi, I appreciate that, and what we'll do is we'll put you in touch with MEDCOM.

Just like this program, really, everything is -- goes through command channels and their commander's program. And so MEDCOM is responsible for all those medical treatment facilities, so if we put you in contact with them, I think that they would -- they would be glad to receive the additional support.

Q Excellent. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Anyone else?

COL. MASON: Andi, one more -- one more opportunity, to kind of go back to your original question. You know, we keep our resources in the Army channels, and while we appreciate all that the outside organizations do for soldiers, information that you were talking about in the very beginning typically goes through the Department of Defense with the AmericaSupportsYou.mil. So that might be another avenue to spread this across the whole Department of Defense. But again, the initial contact with MEDCOM would definitely be an immediate solution, or immediate course of action, and then AmericaSupportsYou.mil as more of a greater, long-term course of action.

Q Okay.

MR. HOLT: Right. And -- and on behalf of DOD, I think we could probably find ways to make that happen as well.

And Colonel Mason, thank you very much for joining us today. It looks like -- looks like we're getting a good start, and we've got -- moving forward -- moving forward on a positive foot, moving out trying to take care of our wounded troops, and we appreciate your being with us today, sir.

COL. MASON: Great. I mean -- I mean, the only reason we exist, this hotline exists, is to take care of soldiers and families. So anything that we can do to get the word out to more people, that's what we want to do. And we've used, you know, Army Times, we've used the Pentagon channels -- (audio break) -- USA Today and numerous other print media. And just a couple of my -- my smart guys recommended going to the blogosphere, and we think that this is just another great opportunity to reach some other people that are more -- are more apt to use the Internet and check all the information that's out there. And so anything that you all can do to help us with that I really appreciate. Q Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: All right. Colonel Ed Mason, director of the Wounded Warrior and Family Hotline, the United States Army Human Resources Command, thank you very much for being with us today, sir, and hopefully we can hear more about it as -- as it develops, as we all develop, in the future.

COL. MASON: Okay, great. And again, that number is 800 984- 8523, and then for overseas it's DSN 312 328-0002.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

COL. MASON: Okay, and then -- and then just to ensure that everyone understands that the name of the -- of the operation is the Wounded Soldier and Family Hotline.

MR. HOLT: Wounded Soldier and Family Hotline.

COL. MASON: Right.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir. Thank you very much.

COL. MASON: Great. Thank you all.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Q Colonel, thank you.

COL. MASON: Take care.

END.